

# BEING A LESBIAN IS NO SIN: RELIGION, SEXUALITY AND EDUCATION IN THE LIVES OF FEMALE STUDENTS

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**Abstract** – *The embodiment of religion in Maltese culture permeates its social organisations. Specifically, the institutionalisation of Catholic beliefs in Maltese society forms value systems and policy in education. This paper discusses the ways that Catholic morality discourses are intertwined with discourses revolving around gender identity, sexual pleasure and the erotic as they emerge from a number of hidden graffiti written on the toilet doors of a postsecondary school in Malta. These graffiti are considered subversive processes of learning, which reproduce, reinforce, question, resist and reject dominant Catholic morality discourses surrounding teenage sexual conduct and gender identity. These students' voices, acting within a graffiti community, offer means of negotiating and resolving tensions, which arise in described romantic and sexual encounters. The discursive spaces created by the graffiti writers question what constitutes 'normal' and demonstrate the contradictory ways that sexual issues could be perceived, understood and experienced. They demonstrate that sexual and erotic knowledge is acquired informally through the hidden curriculum by means of anonymous graffiti, which demonstrate a plethora of mixed feelings surrounding sexual ethics. These writings manifest students' experimentations with public/private boundaries and their attempts at breaking silences, secrecies and taboos revolving around sexualities. The study discusses how adolescent sexual identities are constructed within political, moral, religious and cultural agendas. It addresses the invisibility, voicelessness and non-representation of sexuality education issues in postsecondary curricula.*

## Introduction

**T**he development of romantic relationships is a hallmark of adolescence (Shulman & Collins, 1997; Furman, Brown & Feiring, 1999). Complexities surrounding teenagers' perspectives regarding sexualities and romantic attachments have been explored (e.g., Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Furman & Wehner, 1997; Furman, Brown & Feiring, 1999; Furman, 2002; Kehily, 2002; Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000; Epstein, O'Flynn & Telford, 2003). A number of studies have analysed teenagers' writings about romantic relationships and

sexualities, like in the form of letters to 'Agony Aunts' in teenage magazines (e.g., Currie, 1999; Kehily, 1999), through essays (e.g., Unterhalter et al., 2004) or letters discussed during sex education lessons (Kehily, 2002). The increasing body of research in adolescent sexualities and romantic relationships recognises that 'these relationships are not simply trivial flings' (Furman, 2002, pp. 177-178), but are relevant to adolescents' personal and social worlds.

The study presented in this paper deals with numerous teenage graffiti, which are scribbled on toilet doors of a postsecondary educational institution in Malta and whose subject matter concerns mainly romantic relationships and sexuality issues (Cassar, 2007a). It is assumed that the graffitiists are mostly female students, since the writings are found in female lavatories, in which male students are forbidden entry. Although there are no specific indications that some graffiti have been written by males, I have been informed that a number of male students have however written graffiti on toilet doors of female lavatories at the institution where the research was carried out, in order to make fun of the graffiti, which are presumably written by females. Although I have assumed that the majority of graffiti have been composed by females, I acknowledge that I do not have any evidence related to this. The representation of the graffiti involves an incomplete process. The issue of representation in research and its relations with the search for the truth in complex social practices has not been settled or resolved (Peim, 2005, p. 67).

The writings are nearly all anonymous and they are written in Maltese and English. These countless writings are periodically removed by the cleaners, who scrub them off, although they start reappearing again soon after and replaced by other questions and comments about the same topics. The personal stories and narratives construct a sense of community and could be considered as a fragment of the 'world of sexual stories' (Plummer, 1995, p. 5), which has increasingly become recognised (Plummer, 1995).

Graffiti on toilet doors are also present in a number of Maltese female secondary schools. The phenomenon of graffiti, composed by women in confined, secretive spaces, has a long history. These writings are most likely to occur in controlled, patriarchal cultures, in which women's voices are restricted. For example in 2005, numerous graffiti were discovered in the ancient complex named Steri, which housed the Inquisition in Palermo, Sicily. The Inquisition was the Catholic Church's judiciary, which was tasked with stamping out heresy. These graffiti were found in the prison cells of women accused of witchcraft more than four centuries ago. Their writings testify to their anguish as they waited to be burned at the stake (Johnston, 2005). Graffiti are still being written in prison cells by political women prisoners; for example in Iran (Ebadi, 2006, pp. 172-174).

The graffiti presented in this study manifest their authors' ways of thinking and describe aspects of their social world. Concerns with the body, sexual expression, erotic desire, love, intimacy, trust, parents, birth control, pregnancy and disease are intertwined with dominant religious and education discourses. Psychic forces are intertwined with cultural texts (Kristeva, 1987). Since the ways through which cultural hegemony is maintained are complex (Guzmán, 2003, p. 31), religious, educational and youth sexuality discourses are understood as operating alongside each other and not as being rigidly separate from each other. Coffey (1999) holds that 'The physical act of sex is positioned alongside emotion, desire, gender, culture, time, space ...' (p. 95). Through poststructuralist perspectives, religion, sexuality and education discourses are regarded as accommodating complexity.

Public discourses and individual subjectivities are brought together in the graffiti forum to facilitate the girls' process of acquiring knowledge and norms about sexualities. Teenage students are not only part of the educational institution they learn in, but are also members of a broader social community, which to an extent influences how they adopt knowledges about sexualities to organise their behaviour. The informants' inner world of feelings and thoughts mingles with the external world of cultural norms. The understanding of the connections between the personal and the cultural is however complex, because these are constructed and re-constructed constantly:

'As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition.' (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739)

## **Estrangement from sexuality education**

Sexuality education as a specific subject is absent from postsecondary curricula in Malta. One of the reasons why knowledge is being requested inside the female lavatories, a marginalised school setting, might be due to the deprivation of schooled sexuality education. Sexuality education, as taught in numerous schools in different countries globally, does not include information about relationships, love and intimacy and tends to concentrate on strictly biological aspects (Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000; Mayock & Byrne, 2004). There is much controversy and disagreement about the nature, aims and practice of sexuality education (Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000; Atkinson, 2002). Debates about sexuality education are sensitive and controversial, because of political, ethical and moral connotations (Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000, p. 1)<sup>1</sup>. Debates and implementation policies about the provision of sexuality education in a number of

Mediterranean countries like Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Portugal, Spain and also in northern European countries, have led to considerable pressure by religious institutions, which opposed it through controlled discourses (Safe Project, 2006). The Church in these countries contributes to cultural conservatism, at times even through political parties, which support it. In the eastern Mediterranean region religious leaders are perceived as being reluctant to encourage the provision of sex education for young people, the promotion of condoms as disease prevention and the dissemination of information about HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (Tawilah et al., 2002). Perceived negative attitudes attributed to religious leaders also extend toward gay men. The influence of these leaders and of religious beliefs as well as their impact on the shaping of sexual attitudes in developing Mediterranean countries are considered society's 'foundation stones' (Tawilah et al., 2002).

Competing discourses are involved in sex education (Kehily, 2002). Sexuality has been regarded 'an unclear field of study' (Mac An Ghaill, 1994, p. 2) and research about sexuality in schools 'a complicated business' (Kehily, 2002, p. 5). Schools have viewed students' sexuality as an impediment to the academic purpose of schooling and have either tried to regulate or deny its expression through sexuality education (Thorogood, 2000; Nash, 2002; Paechter, 2004). Adolescents are critical of current approaches to school-based sex education (Mayock & Byrne, 2004), which are unrelated to their sexual experiences (Sears, 1992). These perceived limitations produce a sense of estrangement and alienation in adolescents toward sexuality education received at school:

'Many young people prefer to rely on teen magazines, adult pornography magazines, television and their friends to provide them with more useful information and support about sexuality than they receive at school.'  
(Epstein, O'Flynn & Telford, 2003, p. 51)

## **The study**

Data was collected by means of a digital camera. Photographs of the graffiti were taken at random and then a selection of 191 was made for analysis. These graffiti were written and collected from 2004-2007. Since most of the writings are anonymous, it was difficult to meet the graffitists in person. I have however identified one graffiti author and talked to her (Cassar, 2007a). A number of informants have written their mobile telephone number or e-mail address to be contacted for further advice. Due to ethical reasons and because of the deviant nature of the graffiti, these informants have never been contacted in person. It

would have been particularly unethical to contact those girls who had written their contact number to request lesbian/bisexual sex.

I have treated the graffiti texts as '*discursive clusters*' (Kehily, 2002, p. 7; emphasis in original). I perceive the graffiti texts as being made up of a conglomeration of various discourses about the body, gender, love, sexualities, intimacy, romance and relationships. Since the girls' thinking is partially visible through their writings, the discursive spaces operating within their perspectives can be inspected, reviewed and discussed. This study of discourses examines whose voice is being heard, who is silenced, who is objectified and who is marginalised. Religion, education and sexual conduct discourses are shared and struggled over by the girls through their recognition of the need to work things out through writing about them.

Through discourse analysis I have tried to do more than analyse formal features of language present in the graffiti texts, but attempted to link discourse with power by showing how specific forms of language lead to particular political and ideological interests (Parker, 1997). The study examines 'the content and organization of discourse and what it is used to *do*' (Gill, 1995, p. 167, emphasis in original), according to the informants' fragmentary accounts. In adopting a Foucauldian framework (Foucault, 1972), I understand discourses as not only encompassing what is written but as implying power practices, which make and shape reality. I consider the formation, understanding and analysis of discourses as complex and fluid as no generalisations and certainties can be derived from them. I have adopted Threadgold's (2000) advice that 'we should not "burrow" into discourse looking for meanings', but rather 'look for the external conditions of its existence, its appearance and its regularity' and 'explore the conditions of its possibility' (p. 49). In my interpretation of the writings, I acknowledge that I might have fictionalised aspects of the girls' narratives, which might also have been invented by them in the first place. From a poststructuralist perspective, my analysis could therefore reflect moments when I could have misunderstood or misinterpreted these narratives.

In this study I consider most of the graffitists as seekers and producers of knowledge. I regard their reflexivity as an important factor in understanding their concerns. My aim in bringing forward the girls' writings is to challenge silences surrounding desexualised curricula and demonstrate a deeper recognition of female adolescents' needs in their encounters with the sexual. Understanding young people's perspectives about sexualities is central to understanding any aspect of their sexuality. My positionality gives voice to the viewpoints and concerns, which female adolescents bring to the forum about sexualities. In general, this study positions these voices as 'positively and legitimately sexual' (Allen, 2005, p. 402). My positionality gives prominence to the discourse of 'openness' and the politics I advocate is one of inclusion.

## Subversive dialogue

Although the girls' personal and private narratives occupy public spaces on the school's toilet doors, they are shrouded by confinement. The graffitists could be described as 'subalterns' (Spivak, 1993), since they inscribe their subordinate position. Their secrecy is typical of secretcies surrounding girls' sexuality (Lamb, 2004) and might be related to cultural portrayals of women:

'Secrecy around girlhood sexual feelings may also derive from internalizing cultural anxieties about the media's 'oversexualizing' of girls and objectification of women.' (Lamb, 2004, p. 378)

The writings exhibit a strange way of attempting dialogue. Although they are familiar to many female students, they expose an unconventional, abnormal and even transgressive way of communicating one's intimacies. The normal everyday practice of this strangeness makes them familiar. This familiarity, however, does not soften the huge difficulties, which some informants presumably face. Numerous graffiti reveal the quiet desperation of some students, who beg anonymous and complete strangers for advice (Cassar, 2007b). Some of their questions and statements require serious attention like in the case when suicide, abortion, bulimia, child sexual abuse and depression are mentioned.

According to Spivak (1993), women living in colonial or postcolonial contexts are not equipped with the conceptual language to communicate within the discourse of colonialism, because there is no space for them to articulate themselves and therefore remain condemned to silence. Nations, which had formerly been colonised, experience a profound identity split and sense of irreparable dislocation and displacement (Bhabha, 1994; cited in Stronach & MacLure, 1997, p. 59). Stronach & MacLure (1997) understand Bhabha's conceptualisation of postcolonial discourse as a 'discourse of *otherness*' (p. 59; emphasis by Stronach & MacLure). According to Bhabha, colonial otherness is not constituted by the 'colonialist Self or the colonized Other but by the *disturbing distance in-between*' (Bhabha, 1994; cited in Stronach & MacLure, 1997, p. 59; emphasis added by Stronach & MacLure). Even the graffitists reflect this distance and 'otherness'. Postcolonial authors tend to engage in ambivalent writing, which is partially visible through 'the secret arts of invisibleness' (Bhabha, 1994; cited in MacLure, 2003, p. 146). The graffitists also partake in partial invisible acts of writing. The hidden graffiti also seem to reflect the colonial submissiveness of Maltese people, whose voice was not granted full legitimacy. Female voices in postcolonial settings are heard even less:

‘Women in postcolonial societies carry the double burden of having being subordinated by colonialism and native men.’ (Barker, 2000, pp. 257-258)

## Gender identity

A number of graffiti themes, which expound how religion and sexuality discourses collate together in the educational institution where the research was carried out, will now be discussed. The first theme deals with gender identity.

The graffiti forum is sought to understand gender identity. School processes produce sites for the enactment of heterosexual identities that suggest the normative presence of heterosexuality (Epstein, 1994; Kehily, 2001). Heterosexual identity is actively produced through schools, which could be considered significant cultural sites that reflect sexual ideologies of the patriarchal-heterosexist state. Yet students negotiate their sexual identities and peer group sexual subcultures inside their school (Mac an Ghaill, 1996).

Some of the graffitiists struggle over the implications of heterosexual identities. They explore who they are through anonymity and through writings addressed to ‘Dear Anyone’. Although the graffitiists share the same gender, they do not constitute a homogeneous group but demonstrate that there are different ways of being human and of being female. Despite their anonymity, their written contributions reflect diverse gendered identities and ‘the multiplicity of female expressions and preoccupations’ (Kristeva, 1986, p. 193). The data<sup>2</sup> demonstrates the dilemmas of some girls as they strive to understand how their gender identity brings up conflicting sexual desires and preferences:

*Does any1 know what one should do when your mind body & soul is divided into 2 1 part for ur bf and d other 4 a girl who makes ur mind body & soul turn upside down when you meet her!! ????? I'm fucked up.\**

Anyway it's me again!! Still in d same shit after a week! It's not shit actually ..... It's fuckin brilliant she is! More fucked up!!

*HI I HAVE A BIG PROBLEM I WISH I HAVE A GF I HAVE A BF X MISERABLE. \**

*Help! I am bisexual! I have a bf and I'm very confused in my Life. I'm feeling sick but I love my bf.*

These informants describe how they agonise over how to confront the lovers involved, once the realisation of an erotic preference for males and females is made. The sense of shock and disbelief is evident:

*HELP WANTED HEY! I have a bf but I'm having feelings for 1 of my girl best friends! What the hell am I gonna do? I never thought that I was bi-sexual and shy 2 tell my girl-friend. Should I tell them or carry on with my misreble life! GOD HELP ME!*

The use of the dash in both words 'bi-sexual' and 'girl-friend' demarcate a split self. The prayer appealing to God's help indicates that God might be regarded as a source of support. Feelings of confusion are identified and sadness is communicated: *'God damn! We are all miserable. very confused'*. The term 'we' promotes a sense of community. Kristeva (1986) argues that individuals struggle over sexual identity. She emphasises the *singularity* of each person but also bring outs the *multiplicity* of every person's possible identifications. She demystifies ideological uniformity of gender and retreats from sexism. In the graffiti forum discussions about gender identity also make way for a multiplicity of personalities.

I have regarded the girls' conceptions of the self as discursive constructs. The girls' understandings of who they are challenge the idea of a stable, coherent self. Like Butler (1990), who maintains that there are no answers to the question 'who am I?', they destabilise unitary accounts of the self. Butler (1999) is against the setting up of 'woman' as an eternal abstract universal category. She rejects this notion on the basis of the variations of fragmented identities and discontinuous or provisional understandings of gender identities.

The acceptance of gender identities, other than the heterosexual one, seems to cause anxiety to some heterosexual girls, who struggle to defend heterosexuality, and who associate being lesbian/bisexual with sickness: *'Fuck the Biy they make me sick'*\*. The response repeated the same accusation: *'U make me sick'*. An answer to the question *'Any good looking bisexuals in the school???'* was *'sooo incredibly disgusting what are you? Do you want sex that much?'*\*. The homophobic comments are outnumbered by remarks, which support homo/bi sexuality, but they are present nonetheless.

The girls point out that oppressive norms and practices like homophobia effect the conception of the self. Some girls challenge homophobic ideas presented through the graffiti by advocating the transformation of mentalities, which reject non-heterosexual students. Schools not only serve as central sites for the reproduction and circulation of culture, but also for its transformation (Giroux, 1994). Some graffitiists strive to bring a transformation in the ways that other bisexual/lesbian graffitiists are perceived by challenging taken-for-granted notions through their writings. Bisexual/lesbian/heterosexual writers deconstruct the normative power and the universality of heterosexual desire. They contest the Catholic Church's teaching: *'I've heard the Pope saying that*



*homosexualism is a great sin. But, girls. Do you agree with this?* They point out that heterosexuality is not compulsory for all girls and expose its weaknesses. The official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church (1992) still holds on to the tradition, which has declared that ‘homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered’ and sinful (paragraph 2357).

Some writings problematise homophobia by making its familiarity strange. They object to it as they identify and uphold values related to respect for diversity, autonomy and individuality. The graffitiists deconstruct the notion of heterosexuality understood in terms of being regarded as ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ and resist the view that heterosexuality is the only stable, institutionalised model of stability. They communicate their contempt for the dominant discourses, which hurt the feelings and cause emotional hurt to gay and lesbian minorities. These writers reflect the principles of queer theory (Sedgwick, 1990, 1994; Dollimore, 1991; Butler, 1993, 1999) as they dissect homophobic graffiti and expose imbalances underlying the use of language in relation to sexual identities:

*Girl 2 girl love is not an alternative for anyone! it is the way some people love. it is as good as girl 2 boy love, not an Alternative! its not for u! sucker.*

*Being a lesbian is no sin, I am straight but I respect gays & lesbians as long as they don't try with me. It's a free world.*

Respect for diversity is perceived as being part of a ‘free world’. Numerous graffiti however demonstrate that it is not a free world at all, as the need to create and maintain boundaries of safety is demonstrated even within the toilet walls. Graffitiists who describe themselves as lesbian or bisexual create their own subculture within the graffiti subculture itself, in order to exclude the homophobic writers. The lesbian/bisexual informants generally address their questions to ‘fellow lesbians’ and not to the heterosexual girls. The data, however, suggests that a number of the *same* problems are described as occurring among hetero/bisexual and lesbian relationships, irrespective of gender identity (Cassar, 2007a).

## **The doing it debate**

Some graffiti statements, written mostly in heterosexual contexts, demonstrate that the doing it/not doing it debate is one of concern, which elicits curiosity. For example, a graffiti chart was drawn and readers were asked to tick whether they are virgins or not. The chart showed 6 ticks in the ‘*not virgin*’ column and 3 ticks under the ‘*virgin*’ heading. Although one person could have ticked more than once, in both segregations there were affirmations that they

were ‘*proud*’ to be/not to be a virgin. Some readers showed reluctance to allow intrusions into their private selves and declared that their sexual status is ‘*not anybody’s business*’\*. Debates surrounding this chart demonstrated that whereas some girls described that they gain confidence through sex, others associate sex with feeling used or with degrading oneself. Addressing the ‘*not virgin*’ ticks, one girl asked ‘*where is your dignity guys!?*’ The implication that having sex diminishes one’s dignity may reflect Catholic morality discourses, which discourage sex before marriage. The Catholic theology of the body places emphasis on being sexually responsible and links sexuality to parenthood and to marital chastity. It affirms heteronormativity and assumes that sexual union should only occur in the heterosexual marriage. Some girls have indeed written this explicitly when confronted by writings, which take a sexual relationship for granted: ‘*Wait a min No Sex Before Marriage*’. Such writings manifest an abstinence discourse, which Catholic teachings employ in relation to teenagers and single persons. The presence of the abstinence discourse might indicate that ‘... girls may have been taught that sex is shameful and dirty, their shame encouraging them to police their sexuality’ (Lamb, 2004, p. 378).

Some girls on the other hand narrate that they are simply happy to wait until they feel ready. They argue in favour of being free to choose whether to have sexual experiences or be sexually inactive. Within this schema, some girls transmit the discourse, which dictates that legitimate and fulfilling coupling postpones sexual intercourse until marriage. They insist on safeguarding their personal choices:

*Very much proud, its my body, and my pleasure and above all an expression of love towards my loving boyfriend who accepts me the way I am and so should all the rest of you look for in a man.*

Maltese culture tends to put the burden of responsibility on women with regard to restraining sexual behaviour (Lafayette, 1997). Being a virgin is considered ‘*an expression of love*’. This answer also draws on a Catholic sexual ethics discourse. In its official catechism, the Catholic Church portrays the sexually active, unmarried persons as deviant, indirectly implying that they are ‘disordered’ (Roman Catholic Church, 1992, paragraph 2351). The discourse of the church portrays the heteronormative marriage as the only channel through which sexual expression is morally permissible. It emphasises that ‘Sexual pleasure is morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes’ (Roman Catholic Church, 1992, paragraph 2351). This approach considers casual sex outside marriage as problematic; involving risk of unplanned pregnancy and exposure to sexually transmitted infections.

The Catholic Church's view that an enduring, exclusive, committed relationship in marriage is the only framework for having sex is being challenged. For example, among 417 University of Malta male and female students, 65.8% disagree with the Church's teaching about the prohibition of premarital sex (University of Malta Chaplaincy, 2003, p. 69). While only 5.4% would choose not to get married either civilly or religiously (p. 62), 58.1% find nothing wrong with cohabiting before marriage (p. 64) and 85% disagree with the Church's teaching against the use of contraceptives in birth control (p. 68). Another study confirms that 'the sexual activity of young people (in Malta) has come under the influence of global and western European culture' (Abela, 1998, p. 11).

The comparisons of differences in the virgin/not virgin chart reflect different social attitudes and norms. Issues related to the transition between being a virgin and not remaining one are contemplated as some girls reveal their fears and/or their desire to have sex for the first time. The loss of virginity is considered a special occasion by some informants. Some consider it a right and others a loss or a rite of passage. Some describe that they feel scared, just by thinking about it. For some graffitists, there is no doubt as to whether they should be sexually active. Their narratives contain positive ways of thinking about active sexual desire and expression. The enjoyment of sexual experiences is emphasised: '*Sex is Fun enjoy PPL*'.

## Sexual pleasure

Within the toilet walls, sex is perceived as a function that should be hidden. The girls' articulation of the sexualisation of themselves deals with questions related to practical information surrounding sexual behaviour. As the girls bring forward their perceived complexities and their adherence to existing moral codes, they simultaneously question and deconstruct these same codes. They push an erotic discourse forward, even as they regulate themselves. The following question about the morality of masturbation was possibly framed within the Church's discourse of 'masturbation is a sin':

*Is it right or wrong to masturbate? Do you masturbate often???*

*Yes a lot HEHE!! \**

*No, even I masturbate a lot it is normal but embarassed to show that's why finger fuck is fantastic.\**

*its something natural, yes I do masturbate often! ☺ Don't worry.*

*I don't know how to can some1 help?!?*

These messages can be regarded as constituting a pleasure-seeking mechanism. As the girls acquire, exchange and discuss their sexual knowledge, they experiment by engaging in the construction of pleasure through writing. In this way they repeatedly 'perform' (Butler, 1999) their sexual fantasies and desires. In line with Butler's (1999) perceptions of performativity, their repeated concerns could be regarded as a 'ritual'. Performativity is inextricably linked with institutional practices, which is reinforced through repeated performances:

'... performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.' (Butler, 1999, p. xv)

Some of the girls' statements imply that sexual pleasure is an important component of their liberation, self-determination and autonomy. The question of what constitutes 'normal' however surfaces constantly: '*is it normal that girls hate to masturbate??!*' I have never read any graffiti, which stated that masturbation is wrong. The 'slut' concept (Cassar, 2007a) has not been employed to girls who stated that they masturbate. Irigaray (1985) confirms that woman:

'... finds pleasure almost anywhere. . . . the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined ...' (p. 28)

## Contraception

Some graffiti advice encourages girls to manage sexual desire by sensibly protecting themselves against unwanted sexual experiences, sexually transmissible diseases and pregnancy. Very few graffiti however mention contraception and the ones which do generally revolve more on the use of condoms than on other types. In Malta there are no specific birth-control clinics and in postsecondary schools students do not learn about basic health issues related to sexuality. This might be one of the reasons why the graffiti writers consult the graffiti forum. The dilemmas surrounding the risks of getting pregnant are outlined:

*I have a BF and we've been 2gether for a year and a half now. We really love each other and we wish to stay together forever. We never had real sex although we experiment other things. Now we both wish to have sex and*

*show how much we really love each other but we're both virgins and we're scared of me getting pregnant. We were going to plan to use condoms but I'm still scared because they're not 100% safe. What should we do??*

In their attempts to take the relationship on a higher level and seek more sexual closeness, some girls demonstrate responsibility as they try to balance risk reduction with their desire to 'show their love'. Some advice directed at this situation is once again motivated by the idea that one should not commence a sexual relationship before marriage. As the girls share tips on how to avoid pregnancy, they empathise with each other. They share their fears of getting pregnant, which accompanies sexual experimentation and the exploration of desire amidst their wish to express 'love'. Some explicit advice advocates contraceptive use:

*Use a condom and when he is about to come stop so that he would not be able to ejaculate inside you so that you'll be safer. But DNT WRY TOO MUCH you don't have to. BTW if you worry you'll take longer to get it (menstruation). GOODLUCK.\**

*Don't have sex during the most dangerous time or else start taking the pill. Everyone is a little bit afraid at first. But once you pop u can't stop!! (The most important thing is that you love each other right) xxx. Gdlu.\**

The Church's discourse against the use of contraception is questioned and debated:

*Do you agree that the Church should interfere with one's personal choice of whether to use contraceptives or not?*

*YES! Coz the church protects LIFE! I am a proud Christian! & i love JESUS*

*PURE BULLSHIT The Church brainwashes ppl like yourself. Condoms prevent spreading diseases like HIV and prevent unwanted pregnancies which would unfortunately lead to abortion. GROW UP WE ARE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY NOT D STONEAGE! ALWAYS USE A CONDOM!*

*Who are u to decide who's in the stoneage or not?*

*I don't agree with the church on telling us we shouldn't use contraceptives. I mean c'mon why should a person kill their child if they don't want it. It's better to be safe from the beginning don't u think. It's not offending God in any way put a condom on a person.*

*Church forbids sex in the first place before marriage so you shouldn't use them idiots!!*

Pope John Paul's II (1993) encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* specifically describes the practice of artificial contraception as an act, which is not permitted by Catholic teaching in any circumstances.

## Abortion

Thoughts about the possibility of pregnancy trigger the need to contemplate abortion: *'I think I'm pregnant. I'm only 16!! What do I have to do to get rid of the baby?? help me please!!'* Some advice induces guilt and acts as a corrective to the girl's question:

*Think hard about this its not fair on the child. Adoption is an option. You should have thought about this before you had sex. If you made a mistake then, don't make another one now.*

Advice against abortion is entrenched within discourses, which portray emotionally resonant values produced in some families and secondary schools: *'Buy a small pregnancy test from a pharmacy to be certain first. Abortion is not the solution. Remorse will haunt you in case you kill a new life'\*.* Some girls however, offer alternative advice: *'Drink a whole bottle of vodka at one go → it works!'*\* (some days after this was written someone wrote over this sentence in an attempt to try to cancel it, presumably so that this advice would not spread).

The aftermath of abortion brings up an overwhelming sense of guilt, according to some written confessions. A girl searches for God's forgiveness as a possible means of coming to terms with abortion and arrive at self-acceptance. She faces her sad feelings in what she hopes is a compassionate environment. As she describes her loss, she defends herself against accusations of being considered a bitch:

*I got pregnant and I did an abortion, coz I was too young. Will God ever forgive me? I'm sorry for what I did P.S. Please don't call me a bitch cause I'm not.*

One answer to this plea suggested that one does not have to conform to guilt stricken feelings and dictated what God should do: *'If it was 4 a good reson God SHOULD understand'*. The experience of abortion has led some girls to describe their search for freedom from constraints related to what other people say.

## Finding meaning and support

The graffiti themes discussed demonstrate a lack of positive intergenerational dialogue between parents and their teenage daughters and between teachers and students. Graffiti suggestions to seek advice from adults are totally absent. This could either be interpreted as a sign of autonomy or else as distrust in grown ups. The graffitists might believe that their teachers, parents or other adults do not understand their situations and cannot answer their questions. The girls have never written: 'What should the curriculum or school do to help me or how can my parents help me?' The absence of adult mention might indicate that some girls may not feel the need for formal sexuality education at their educational institution.

Parental attachment is disrupted when daughters deviate from their parents' cultural norms and beliefs. One informant's narrative reveals how descriptions of her parents' subjectivities uncover a racist discourse and an othering attitude:

*My family is against black people and I'm going out with an Arab. We had sex many times .. in fact my period is overdue and I think I'm pregnant. What the fuck am I going to do? How can I tell my parents that I had an intimate relationship with a person they dislike? Help me please.\**

Having sexual relations with racially diverse men, especially 'black', is described as a problem when parents deny their consent for such relationships to occur. Some informants are faced with their parents' limitations and learn the flaws of the adult world. Crises in the parents' own relationships or marriage and how these affect their children are described as causing serious ramifications:

*MY MUM & Dad R splitting up. Dad is such a creep, I can't stand him. He has no respect whatsoever for women, and calls me all kinds of names, starting from 'whore' to 'go kill urself' . I think its because of him I have trouble dating guys. I don't trust them, and my longest relationship was 2 wks long. Seriously, what should I do?? It feels lonely not being able to be with some(one) else. Any advice?*

This described sense of vulnerability was felt by a number of graffiti readers who responded. One answer stated: '*I think @ the moment you should find a best friend in yourself. Bad people pick on good people, so fight spiritually and HOPE. I know you can manage, and so do you, deep down ☺*'. The girl might have confirmed that she wanted to heed this advice as '*10Q!! I will*' was written some days after. Warnings from other graffitists about the dangers of becoming involved with people, who might be '*bad*' just like her dad, ensued. In giving advice to '*fight*

*spiritually*', a religious discourse is employed, aimed at encouraging the distraught girl to overcome her described fears, anguish, insecurity and lack of self-esteem. The advice might imply that God could be regarded as a surrogate parent. From this perspective and in view of the breakdown of intergenerational dialogue, religion is regarded as a source of solace and strength and as an important moral guide.

Some graffiti advice revolves around a discourse, which advocates the reliance on religious icons: '*Jesus Christ is the only one who can make your life worth living*'. The question of whether a life without love is worth living has been put up for 'discussion'.

*What are we living for? If one has no love, friends and a family who love, isn't better just to die and leave all problems behind?*

*No, it isn't better. You have to fight problems Life isn't made of beautiful things only. This is just an ugly period 4 u. It WILL PASS!!*

*Yeah! It hasn't passed for 17 years, & wont pass now! But I like your positivity.*

The girls' search for love leads them to explore different conceptualisations of love and to construct understandings of their sexual selves. A life devoid of love is perceived as not worth living and as insignificant. The girls' search for purpose in life touches on existentialist questions, which all world religions and cultures grapple with. Although the study is situated in a particular context and culture, it reflects wider realities:

'How and toward whom love is expressed varies by culture. Yet there are certain fundamental human propensities for connection that find expression in some form universally.' (Josselson, 1996, p. 8)

## Discussion

In the absence of a language for adolescents, with which to talk about sexual expression, behaviour and feelings through their curriculum (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994), young people make up their own discourses about the sexual. Available discourses are inadequate as they are either too clinical or regarded as obscene (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 1994). In Malta this situation is even more accentuated, since even basic words, such as those referring to the genital organs and to the act of making love, are considered rude.



In trying to defy silence, some girls explore possible ways out of their shyness, low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy and inferiority complex, which arise through their described sexual feelings for other teenagers they are attracted to or involved with. In seeking approval from their toilet mates, some girls empower themselves to speak out. The demonstration of their feelings and doubts on toilet doors could however further reinforce their shyness and inhibitions. The graffiti biographies could be perceived as an escape from reality, since they occur in a context that fosters a sense of isolation, individualism and disembodiment from face to face dialogue. The girls' attempts at writing however could offer them spaces to learn about how to reach self-acceptance and how to form successful attachments with persons they are sexually attracted to. In their search for knowledge about the sexual, some informants construct channels of dialogue through which they can creatively rework power. Inside the lavatories, the girls cannot be fully assessed or monitored. This sense of freedom grants them power and control to unite in order to write about their problems and expose their lover/s, parents, classmates and friends to judgment.

Education is one of the vehicles through which the acquisition of knowledge and skills related to romantic intimacies and sexuality issues could be made possible. The graffiti confront the silences that surround sexualities at their school. They act against the prevailing institutionalised silence by using the same language of silence in secretive, anonymous and subversive conditions. Yet the graffiti space functions as a medium of self-learning and teaching. The girls teach themselves and each other and in a way the lavatories are transformed into a 'classroom'. The pedagogical spaces they construct expose and challenge their self-knowledge and serve as means of acquiring new ideas and possibilities. As they write about their problems and embark on efforts of self-inquiry, some of them seem to increase their self-awareness. Some graffitists seek to unlearn silence because their teachers/parents/caregivers might not provide reliable knowledge and emotional support or provide little. Yet, the graffiti education functions paradoxically as both a status quo as well as an emancipatory, even transgressive movement.

The girls' hidden writings in the lavatories and the hiding of their names could be considered manifestations of the hidden curriculum they are creating. Their hiding also replicates the hiding and invisibility of sexuality education. Their anonymity gives them a sense of freedom and safety but it also reflects their fear of publicly asserting who they are. Historically most women have felt afraid and inadequate in asserting themselves in patriarchal cultures.

The study questions whether the educational agenda, with particular reference to Maltese postsecondary schools, is meeting the needs of adolescent students regarding issues pertaining to sexualities and romantic relationships. The graffiti

main themes (Cassar, 2007a) constitute the kind of knowledge the girls are constantly requesting. The Maltese postsecondary National Minimum Curriculum aims at contributing toward the 'education of the "whole" person' by empowering students with both life and study skills. It invites them to adopt a holistic approach to knowledge, to become reflective, critical and 'self-directed learners' (Ministry of Education, 1991). It also seeks to direct students to 'handle emotional responses in a mature manner' and develop their communication skills (Ministry of Education, 1991). It does not however mention the sexual development of postsecondary students.

The corpus of graffiti could be regarded as a form of discourse in itself and part of the postmodern 'discursive explosion' about sexuality (Foucault, 1978). The girls' voices provide a discourse for them, through which they confront their existential questions and problems. The graffiti discourse refers to the ways the graffiti language works to organise fields of knowledge and practice. The discursive formations present in the graffiti texts indicate how sexualities are produced in school settings. This study suggests that the transmission of culture occurs inside educational institutions and that sexualities are shaped and lived through student cultures. Discourses of religion and education produce sexual identities and act within political, moral and cultural agendas. The graffiti suggest that sexual pleasure is mediated by cultural norms and that the discourses and practices around adolescent sexuality construct the adolescent sexual body in certain ways. Discourses of sexuality are positioned amidst constructs related to the curriculum, policy and politics operating in Maltese society. They reflect postcolonial influences in the construction of national and personal identity. The graffiti narratives could therefore be regarded as having political importance.

The graffiti demonstrate that young people's concepts about sexualities question a traditional, Catholic, restricted, insular and conservative paradigm. Studies reveal that Maltese society is embracing a more secular, democratic, liberal, egalitarian, pluralist, racially diverse and cosmopolitan outlook (Abela, 1991, 1998, 2000; Cassar, 2004) and integrating European principles (Abela, 2000) despite the hold of Roman Catholicism. Comparative studies of Maltese and European values give evidence of a gradual shift from widespread conformity toward greater individualised values, a multiplicity of lifestyles and pluralistic behaviour (Abela, 2000). There is greater acceptance of the diversity of lifestyles including those related to homosexual persons and more policies favouring gender equality: 'the strict traditional morality of the Church in Malta is gradually giving way to a more open discourse on sexuality and its ensuing secularisation' (Abela, 1998, p. 66).

The process of moving toward secularism and liberalism has on many occasions proven to be a divisive, controversial and disturbing experience in Maltese society. Debate on the morality of issues, such as divorce and abortion are

intense and highly polarised. The use of contraception as a means of avoiding sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy is still debated and there is no consensus between advocates of the abstinence debate and the more liberal faction. Discourses about sexuality and love compete with one another and send out conflicting messages to adolescents. They hear the abstinence discourse simultaneously with messages advocating the legitimacy and normality of being sexually active. Adolescent girls are often told to be virtuous and reserved sexually. Peer cultures and the media however often convey the idea that being sexy is beneficial to gain popularity. Some boys are also told to control their sexual desires by their parents, but they are expected to be sexually active by their peers. Maltese young people are expected to grow up and be responsible for their actions, yet they are also discouraged from behaving in grown up ways when they are not trusted in terms of the choices they make. The conflicting messages conveyed to adolescents could interfere with their identity formation and cause confusion in terms of what the transition into adolescence signifies. Alternatively through conflicting messages they can deepen their knowledge and understanding of the complexities related to sexualities and romantic intimacies.

While the Foucauldian notion of discourse has been accused of gender blindness and determinism (see Walby, 1990), poststructural workings of it through discourse analysis however open up awareness and challenges to oppressive discourses in recognition of the multiplicity of discursive practice and subjectivity, including gender identity (Mama, 1995). Graffiti writers show that the desire for human connection and sexual expression is compelling and year after year they continuously face the perplexities and implications surrounding it (Cassar, 2007a). Sexuality has overwhelming power and some people, including the informants, regard it as a way through which they acquire a sense of belonging and acceptance. For some people, religion is also regarded as having this purpose to unite people and to get them together in the sharing of everyday and even significant life events. Both religious and sexual experiences offer means of self-discovery and could be considered as paths toward the understanding of life's purpose. As the graffitiists grapple with the understanding and meaning of human relatedness, they leave a trail behind them, which throws significant light to educational policy makers and curriculum authors. Through education, dialogue about the significance of religion and sexualities can be brought together in ways, which encompass the same paradoxes, doubts and contradictions, which students are legitimately facing and uncovering. The present discourse of silence prevalent in postsecondary curricula could therefore be replaced by discourses of openness, mutual understanding and respect for diversity.

## Notes

1. A general overview of sexuality education theories and programmes is outlined and discussed in Bruess & Greenberg (2004) and values related to the principles and practice of sexuality education in Halstead & Reiss (2003). A study about policies and practice of sexuality education in European countries has been carried out by the Safe Project (2006).
2. Quotes marked by an asterisk (\*) have been either partially or completely translated from Maltese.

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